LA MANSANA DE CHINATI
1989

Aside from Fort Russell, which was more determined from the beginning and is still not organized as a new whole, La Mansana de Chinati, the block, a city block in town, is the largest and most complete place that I've planned. Originally there were only two large iron and adobe warehouses parallel to each other and a much smaller two-story building on a block open to the main highway on the south and to the railroad tracks and a feed mill on the north. This was a very general arrangement which determined at most a corresponding rectangular alignment. The busy and public nature of the place required an enclosing wall, made of adobe in accordance with what was available of old adobes and with what could be made.

Although most of the houses in the town are made of adobe the technique had been forgotten. I hired legal workers from Mexico to make adobes and to lay them. The reason for the neglect of the technique is that everyone, Anglo-Americans always and Mexican Americans now, considers the material unstylish. To the Anglo-Americans it is poor and Mexican; to the Mexican Americans it is poor and un-American; to both it is not upwardly mobile, not middle class. There is more status in aluminum siding and plastic walnut paneling. In this case the preference is not due to availability and lower cost – the siding and paneling are more expensive. "Store-bought" things represent the greater society, the society that somewhere is supposed to know more than the consumers, who nevertheless think they are making a decision, "know best," when they choose between flowers and diamonds on the plastic tablecloth. My farming neighbors here in Europe have plastic dwarfs in front of their house. In Texas they use plastic ducks. The claim these represent is large and vague; the identification to outsiders is small and precise. This is a big subject. It certainly pertains to equally vague politics. All over the world there are plastic dwarfs and ducks. There is supposed to be two and a half times as many dwarfs as Austrians in Austria. It's possible that there are thirty million ducks in Texas. Anyway Texas is

paved with plastic walnut paneling, whose connotation isn't precise: all classes love it.

The outer adobe wall is built on the property line around the block. The top of its southeast corner, which is on the highest point of the slight slope of the land, is level with the top of the corresponding corner of the wall of the east building, which is about two-thirds of the façade, the remainder above being a clerestory. The wall is level around the block. There is a gate to the north in line with the east building. This arrangement makes a courtyard, which is traditional in many places, and which I think is the best use of urban land. The principle could be amplified in planning new neighborhoods and cities. In the United States it is necessary to place your home or your skyscraper in the middle of your lot in order to have a lawn on which to place your ducks. The scheme of a building or buildings surrounding a courtyard also makes better and more defined streets, which is more particularly urban and which saves land outside.

The two large buildings primarily contain my work, most of it fairly old. But both are for living and working. The eastern building has a kitchen and a bedroom, the western a library and a studio. The installation of my work in the eastern building began in 1973, as that desire became clear. As in the building in New York City, the installation was meant to be permanent, and again, despite attack, remains permanent, and, also like the situation there, the installation was used as a model to devise one more way to exploit art. William Morris thought that in subsequent generations good ideas might be made to be bad. Now they are made bad fast. The two-story building became a home for myself and the two children. For most of the time the upper floor has contained large works of art from the Northwest Coast of North America, new and old, Tlingit and Kwakiutl. The slight slope of half of the block and the problem of drainage suggested increasing the slope which was between the large buildings and leveling the remainder beyond the buildings, including the area around the two-story building. The break between the two

areas bisects the block crosswise and provides drainage. The slope dips in two directions to the northwest corner at the low retaining wall of the break. Twelve feet out from the two buildings and from the southern wall is a second wall whose top slopes parallel to the slope of the land. I first thought of a complex with concentric walls, a triangle, for a ranch with no buildings in Baja California called El Porvenir: it is still *el porvenir.*[1] West Texas looks like Iceland, where place names are old and famous. But in Iceland the names remain, whereas in West Texas and the north of Mexico the buildings haven't been built yet.

The outer level wall and the inner sloping wall are one work. The outer wall encloses the two buildings, which enclose the inner wall and the slope. It also encloses alone the level part of the block. In the center to the north of the level part there will be a pond, small in relation to the enclosed slope within the inner walls, but extreme in pitch so as to always hold rainwater. The pitch to the northwest corner will make a constant triangle of water. All the roofs and portions of the land will drain into the pond.

The first floor of the two-story building could not contain a bathroom so a separate small adobe building, the same height as the wall, was built between it and the large east building. Later a corresponding one was built by the west building as an office. In the level area toward the north there is a garden and a combination of a greenhouse and a chicken coop to the west of the future pond and the axis of the gate and a pergola and a tank for swimming, surrounded by cottonwoods, to the east. There may be further buildings. The main idea is the two concentric walls, the inner one sloping, and the two planes of land, one sloping entirely, one level, containing the steep pitch of the pond.

(Images 92, 93, 100–104, 117, 145)

1 Translates from the Spanish as "the future."

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